CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND THE SUNDAY SCHOOL

by LAURENCE E. PORTER

MR. PORTER'S articles and reviews on Christian education have established him in the eyes of our readers as an experienced and judicious authority in this important field. His mastery of the subject is widely recognized in the teaching world. Here he turns to consider the relation between Christian education in the day school (which has provided the matter for his previous contributions to the QUARTERLY) and Christian education in the Sunday School, with its special implications for the Sunday School curriculum. What he has to say will be read with interest by Christian teachers in day schools and by Sunday School teachers, as well as by others who have a concern for the Christian education of children.

THE Sunday School is an institution which is causing deep searching of heart in many quarters. Various bodies are giving much thought to the matter, as for instance the Children's Special Service Mission which in the years immediately following the war set up a Sunday School Department, which has taken its place as one of the major activities of the Mission; and much discussion of the question has taken place even in the daily press.[1]

The proposition that all is not well with the Sunday School would evoke general assent, not least from those who—to use the modern jargon—"couldn't care less". But there is nothing new in this view. The Sunday School has always suffered, in the nature of things, by comparison on the one hand with the Church, of which it has been regarded as the junior and immature department, and on the other with the day school, measured against which it has been held to be but an amateurish imitation.

More interest exists now in the Sunday School, and yet one cannot help feeling that much modern thinking on the subject is vague and based on uncertain foundations. The question which cries out for an answer, and to which a satisfactory answer is seldom forthcoming, concerns our conception of what the Sunday School is or ought to be.

There are several answers to this question. First, to be mentioned and then disposed of, is what the parent thinks in many

[1] See, for instance, the interesting leading article in *The Times* of Aug. 14, 1956.

cases ; namely, that the local church or chapel is responsible for providing a nursery school where they can know the children are safe from the busy traffic while Mother takes a well-earned nap on Sunday afternoon ! But it would not be proper to take too casual a view even of this attitude to the Sunday School. In days when domestic help in the house is a thing of the past and shopping is a constant anxiety, who can deny that the conscientious mother bears a heavy and unremitting burden, and that an occasional break is a most pressing need ? And, more important still, the presence of these children in the Sunday School, whatever ultimate motives lie behind their attendance, nevertheless constitutes a challenge. Here is a seed-bed where seeds can be planted that may yield their harvest long years after the youngster has passed from the orbit of the Sunday School. "Be not deceived, God is not mocked ; whatsoever a man soweth the same shall he also reap". This is a promise, as well as a warning ! And yet, while rejoicing at the opportunities that are presented when the harassed mother sends her children to be minded, we shall hardly take this as a sound and solid foundation for our thinking on the nature of the Sunday School !

There is a second point of view which regards the Sunday School as a sort of "young worshipping community".

> "The intention behind much of the organization of Sunday Schools, now going on, is to convince children that in belonging to a Sunday School they belong also to a Church. . . . They thus acquire a sense of belonging to one worshipping family."

So the Leading Article in *The Times* newspaper of August 14, 1956. And again:

> "Among all the denominations, the name 'Sunday School' is no longer in favour ; it is thought to be an inadequate, if not misleading, description of the kind of young worshipping community that is sought. Some of the Free Churches have therefore given the new names 'junior church' or 'children's church' to their new conception of Sunday School work."[2]

This sounds very well, but on reflection one may wonder whether it rises in any way from the conception of the Church that is so prominent in contemporary theological debate, as a body carrying its own peculiar authority received by divine and unbroken transmission from Apostolic days, membership of which constitutes more or less the equivalent of what conversion itself is in the concepts of the Reformed tradition. Now it is obvious that there is in the youngest child a faculty very near akin to worship. We would not, moreover, deny that in the public and ordered worship

[2] *Ibid.*

of the People of God there is much that cannot fail to be of the highest value to the child who from early days accompanies his parents to Church, Chapel or Meeting House. But to suggest that the purpose of the Sunday School is to manufacture "young worshippers" is surely to put the cart before the horse.

The other conception of the Sunday School is that it is indeed what it claims to be—a school, a place of instruction, of education. "From a child", wrote Paul to Timothy, "thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation" (2 Tim. 3: 15). And no one can come to the Living Word of God except by reading or hearing the written Word of God. The quality of the spiritual life of converts will be vastly strengthened by a knowledge of the Scriptures built up by systematic study throughout childhood years. This is not, of course, to say that the mission of the Sunday School is limited solely to teaching. The article, already quoted, from *The Times*, puts this point admirably:

> "The Sunday School, for all its frequent imperfections, does offer the children something which the day school cannot, a faith related to life and the experience of worship with one gathered family. And it is in the Sunday School that children become aware that to be a Christian is more than an assent to truth; it is a matter of personal committal."

If we accept this view that the Sunday School exists to *teach*, that it is indeed a vehicle of Christian education, there are other questions that will demand an answer.

Ought we, for example, to attempt to enter into competition with the day schools, and take into account what they are doing; or ought the Sunday School to plan its educational programme, its curriculum, without reference to them? It is one of the most remarkable factors in the contemporary educational scene that after generations of questionings and hesitation, after years of debating and acerbity, Religious Instruction has been permitted to advance towards its rightful position in the school curriculum. The Education Act of 1944 made mandatory the use of an "Agreed Syllabus"[3] thus ensuring systematic Scripture teaching in all State Schools. It placed upon the Local Education Authority the responsibilty of agreeing upon its Syllabus, so bringing to an end the years of jealous rivalry between the Church and the

[3] Those interested in the provisions of the 1944 Education Act and its putting into practice will find further information in articles in THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, Vol. 20 (1948), pp. 252-271; and Vol. 26 (1954), pp. 130-145; also papers by G. S. Humphreys and E. W. Crabb in *Trans. Vict. Inst.*, 1948, 1954.

Schools; while by making Religious Instruction subject to inspection by Her Majesty's Inspectors like all other subjects on the time-table, it went far to remove from this discipline the slur of being considered the "soft option" of the curriculum. It will, of course, be many years before all the intentions of the Act are translated into practice, but much progress has already been made Whereas a generation ago it was the exception rather than the rule to find Scripture teaching carried out as efficiently and effectively as the teaching of other subjects, the reverse is now becoming more and more true.

The fact that Scripture is now well taught in many day schools *must* be taken into account—it cannot be ignored. In the days when, in the countryside at least, elementary education was mostly in the Church schools, the local incumbent knew how much he could assume his Sunday School scholars already knew. What does the modern Sunday School teacher know of the nature and the extent of the Scripture teaching which the children in his own class are receiving? It is evident that his work will gain greatly in effectiveness if he is aware of this factor.

"The nature and the extent", we have said; that is: *How* is Scripture being taught? and *how much* Scripture is being taught? Method and Syllabus are here, and these may serve as the headings for our examination of the position.

I

How is Scripture taught in the day schools today? Perhaps the outstanding difference between the Religious Instruction in day schools and Sunday Schools is that in the former it is in the hands of *trained teachers*. The Sunday School teacher may—and indeed very often does—know the Word of God better than his counterpart in the day school, but the day school teacher has the advantage of professional training and day-to-day experience which enable him to make the fullest use of what knowledge he does possess. He knows from experience gained in teaching other subjects how best to prepare and present his material, how to capture and retain the interest of the class, how to discover by questionings during the lesson and by various forms of periodical tests how much of his teaching has been assimilated and what points will need to be gone over again; he knows above all how to avoid the many pitfalls that beset the teacher's path.

Furthermore, he works under the direction of a head master who is also a trained teacher, and so he will not normally have to face the difficulties met by many a conscientious and capable

teacher in a Sunday School whose superintendent has been chosen rather on account of his gifts as a minister of the Word or his standing as a member of the Church than of his understanding of children or his capabilities as a disciplinarian.

The question naturally poses itself whether it is possible for the Sunday School teacher to narrow the gap that separates him from his professional brother in this work of Christian Education due to his lack of formal professional training. Various bodies—outstanding among them the Children's Special Service Mission—have sought to meet this challenge. The C.S.S.M. conducts short residential courses where professional teachers give concentrated help and instruction in the pedagogic art, and for those who cannot manage such courses, evening preparation classes in some of the large centres of population; they also have a correspondence training course for Sunday School teachers, where written exercises and essays are done by the students and corrected and annotated by tutors who for the most part are professional teachers. Some Sunday School teachers attend vacation refresher courses organized by various bodies for Scripture teachers in day schools, and benefit not only from the formal instruction received but also from the discussion of their problems in private conversation with other practitioners of their craft.

All this is of the highest value in itself, and more still as a foretaste of what may yet come, for it would be a most desirable eventual development if there could be established residential courses of instruction lasting perhaps a whole term of three or four months where young teachers could lay a really sound foundation.

A second practical point of teaching method on which the Sunday Schools have already learnt much from the day schools, and on which there is still much to learn, is that of *Visual Aids*. There probably never was a time when the Sunday School teacher did not regard as axiomatic that "eye-gate" is as profitable and effective an entrance as "ear-gate", but technical advances in photography, projection and the like have in recent years revolutionized visual methods in the classroom. This, of course, presents another challenge to the Sunday School teacher, not necessarily to seek to emulate or outdo the day school, but to seek to discover what possibilities visual methods offer to him in his own—let us admit it—more limited sphere. His sphere *is* more limited in many ways. First, there are few Sunday Schools which can give each teacher a separate class-room, and so visual aids must be limited to such

as can be used without distracting neighbouring classes. This will probably cut out the big film or film strip projector from most normal lessons, but there still remain maps and pictures, flannelgraphs and various other aids. Secondly, there is the question of time. The day school teacher will have 35-45 minutes perhaps three times a week, the Sunday School teacher will be fortunate to get 25 minutes, and that, of course, only once a week. In the third place, visual aids can be costly, and the Sunday School does not enjoy an equipment grant of anything like the same order as that provided by the Local Education Authority.

Within these limits, however, there are considerable possibilities, but one or two points must be borne in mind. First, if visual aids are to be used at all, the work should be done well. An old-fashioned "magic lantern" with outworn slides may have been for children forty years ago a satisfactory counterpart to the silent film of Charlie Chaplin or Mary Pickford, with its imperfections of projection making it seem that while films were being made it always rained; but today it only too easily invites unfavourable comparisons with talking films in the cinema, film-strip projectors and epidiascopes in school, and the ubiquitous "telly" in the home. So, if we are to have aids at all, they should be limited to those of which we have available the best of their kind. A good flannelgraph is infinitely preferable to a shoddy film.

It must also be borne continually in mind that it is of visual *aids* that we are speaking; *aids*, not ends in themselves. They are the handmaidens of teaching, and can never be a substitute for teaching itself. "Faith cometh by hearing . . .", and the promise of the visual is to assist this hearing of the Word of God, an aid, that is, to verbal communication. This will become more apparent as the child grows older, and from the beginning of the "-teens", visual aids will normally take a less and less important place.

Other points might well be considered on this question of *how* Scripture is taught in the day school, but a still more important topic is *what* Scripture is taught. Let us therefore turn our attention to the question of the syllabus.

II

Every school has its curriculum, its plan of work to be covered at each stage of the child's progress. It is so in Mathematics and in English, in French and in Geography, in Latin and in Physics. What could one say of a history master just choosing here and

there the subjects of his lessons with no attempt to set them in their historical sequence? Why, then, should it be thought reasonable—and there are yet many Sunday Schools where it is—that the teacher should prepare each week a fresh lesson with little reference to what was taught last week or the week before, and none whatever to what is being done and has already been done by the other teachers? This is not teaching, but preaching; and it is mere declamation to suggest that a set scheme of lessons is a limitation of the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit.

But when we have agreed that a Syllabus is necessary, there still remains the question of what are the essentials of a good Syllabus, and how is it to be compiled. Among the various schemes in use in Sunday Schools, most will fall into one or other of three main types. First, there is the Syllabus drawn up by the teacher himself, or, better still, by the Sunday School in which he is teaching. Secondly, there are schemes drawn up by the various denominational bodies, and by bodies like the National Sunday School Union and the C.S.S.M. Thirdly, there is the "Agreed Syllabus" drawn up or adopted by each Local Educational Authority for the use of Scripture Teachers in its own schools. What are the respective advantages and drawbacks of these three approaches to our problem?

First, the teacher's own Syllabus has many obvious points in its favour. The teacher will be teaching what he is interested in, and one result must surely be a contagious enthusiasm that will infect the children he is teaching. The fact that he has chosen what he is interested in will also clearly mean thorough, and therefore probably effective, preparation of his subject matter. Not less important, the teacher's own knowledge of the text of Scripture and his personal spiritual life cannot fail to benefit from his studies But there are perils, especially if the teacher who has drawn up the scheme of work is inexperienced, or has his own strong preferences. His teaching may become one-sided, consisting almost exclusively of "types", or of character-studies, or of the historico-geographical background, or of Christian doctrine, or of whatever the teacher's main interest may be.

Furthermore, if the individual teacher is drawing up his own syllabus, in Sunday Schools where (as in the majority, no doubt) the class passes on to another teacher at the end of twelve months, there will be the danger of lack of co-ordination between the work of the various teachers. So there will be small means of knowing what can be expected from the class in the way of knowledge al-

ready possessed at the beginning of the year, or whether the bulk of what is done with a particular group during one year's teaching will be taken into account when the classes "go up", or just ignored. To sum up concerning this type of Syllabus, it might be said that its main value is to the teacher in a Sunday School where no definitely planned scheme is followed generally by other teachers as a whole.

It is clear that a much more satisfactory kind of Syllabus is one followed by the whole school, drawn up either by the Superintendent and his teachers, or by some "outside" body in published form. Of these, the latter is likely to be the more workable in most cases. If the Superintendent is not himself a teacher, he will naturally feel that he wants all the help that can be supplied by those whose life is spent studying and practising the techniques of education. If he is a practising teacher then he will be the more fully aware of the different methods called for by various age groups. For instance, if his work is mainly in Grammar School or Modern Secondary School work, he will be acutely aware of his inability to draw up a Syllabus for the under-11 group, while if his days are spent with restless juniors he will not wish to legislate for apathetic 15-year-olds.

The published Syllabuses on the other hand are produced by those who can command all types of experience, and so will avoid many pitfalls that the unwary feet of the non-professional teacher may become entangled in. As already indicated, there are in the main two types of Syllabus available; those prepared with the Sunday School mainly in view, and those prepared by Local Education Authorities for their day schools. It has already been suggested that the Sunday Schools may have something to learn from their week-day colleagues, and it would seem obvious that these "Agreed Syllabuses" might be examined to see what can be gleaned from them.

Let us first of all consider the Courses of Lessons specifically drawn up for Sunday Schools. Of these, pride of place must undoubtedly be given to those prepared by the Children's Special Service Mission and published in their Teachers' magazines.[4] Before entering on any detailed discussion, a word of personal testimony may be permitted. It is our very definite conviction that these magazines are unparalleled in the help they offer to the Sunday School teacher of today. They contain prepared lessons which

[4] *The Primary Teachers' Magazine, The Sunday School Magazine,* and *The Senior Teacher's Magazine.* Monthly, 9*d.* each.

combine an evangelical regard for the supreme authority of Holy Scripture with a real understanding and experience of the needs of both child and teacher, and of the possibilities of what can be done in the time and with the materials available. It is a work for which the C.S.S.M. and their Sunday School Director, Mr. J. Reginald Hill, merit the gratitude of every evangelical Sunday School and of all Christian people everywhere who have the work of the gospel among the young at heart. Any comments which follow concerning the Syllabus in use are to be construed in no way as criticism of the Scheme as it stands, but rather as "thinking aloud" about lines along which Sunday School teaching may perhaps develop in the years that lie ahead.

The Syllabus followed is based on that drawn up for Sunday Schools by the late Dr. G. Campbell Morgan, and it is presented in these Lesson Courses in such a way that mere mechanical repetition of the same lessons every four years is avoided. For instance, there are special topics suitable for the great festivals of the Christian year, there are periodical lessons on outstanding missionary heroes, and there is regular provision for recapitulation. The Scheme is divided into three levels: Primary (under 8), Juniors (9-12) and Seniors (13-16). Roughly speaking, about half of each year in the Junior and Senior grades[5] is devoted to the Old Testament, and about half to the New. The four years of each of these two courses divide the main Old Testament narrative into four parts, while in the New Testament two years are devoted to the gospel story and two to the development of the Early Church in *Acts*. The prepared lessons are divided each week into two parts, Teacher's Preparation and Lesson Preparation, and there is a memory text set on each lesson.

A scheme of this kind has many very obvious advantages. First, it is systematic; each child will, between the ages of 9 and 16, go systematically through the life of our Lord as recorded in the gospels, the story of the spread of Christianity in *Acts*, and the main outline of Old Testament history—and all that twice over. Then, abundant aids are supplied and the teacher has to hand all the necessary material for lesson preparation. Here, there is one caveat to be entered; the teacher will, of course, have to be taught how to use his Lesson Books, which are not intended as a substitute for preparation, but as an aid to preparation. "A syllabus

[5] It will be observed that no examination is made of the Primary lessons. The writer, being a Grammar School master, feels himself incompetent to do so.

is simply", said the wise Spencer Leeson, "a piece of paper. It may be slavishly and unintelligently used, it may confine where it should guide".[6] But if the teacher will absorb, digest, prepare and then give to his class what he finds in the "prepared lesson", then the aid supplied will be a great advantage. Furthermore, in those Sunday Schools where (as should ideally be the case in all), a regular teachers' preparation class is held, the work of this class is made easier and more profitable where a scheme of this kind is followed.

What then, if any, are the limitations of such a Syllabus? Mainly, it would seem, in the lack of co-ordination between the material studied and the age of the child. It is true that the Syllabus is divided into age groups each covering about four years; true also that indications are given from time to time as to how a lesson, say in the Senior section, might be differently adapted to the needs of 13-year-olds and 16-year-olds, both of whom come in the same group. But it nevertheless remains that the Syllabus sometimes seems to begin rather from the needs of the Sunday School than of the child.

A few examples may serve to show what is meant. In day schools, most of the Agreed Syllabuses provide that part of the work during the first two or three years of the Senior course is a fairly rapid outline of the Old Testament story from Abraham onwards. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David and the rest follow in chronological sequence in the lessons of children between eleven and thirteen. Every child thus starts with a general conception of the development of Old Testament history. In Dr. Campbell Morgan's scheme a child who happened to reach the age of twelve or thirteen in 1951 would start with Genesis and do very much the same thing, but his brother a year younger would start with Exodus, finish the Old Testament and then return to Genesis three years later. A youngster born a year later still would start with 1 Samuel and spend a couple of years on the latter part of the Old Testament, followed by another two years on the earlier. It would seem more natural and more profitable for every child to start at the beginning.

And if this is true in the case of Bible history (and what applies to the Old Testament applies also to the New—by the accident of birth a child may do *Acts* before the Gospels), how much more so in the case of the teaching of doctrine? Especially for the over-twelves, children ought to be made aware of the great

[6] *Christian Education* (Bampton Lectures, 1947), p. 154.

Biblical doctrines, of Sin and Forgiveness, of Redemption and of the Holy Spirit, and of many more. This teaching ought to follow a definite pattern spread over the four years or so of the senior course, which is obviously not possible in a scheme of the kind under examination. The C.S.S.M. recognize the need for doctrinal teaching, and about three lessons a year are devoted definitely to topics of this nature—generally carefully prepared so as to be adaptable to the needs of each age within the group. Thus there is usually a lesson on the Holy Spirit or the Trinity at Whitsuntide. But, however skilfully the teacher adapts the lesson to the age of his pupils, teaching of this, probably the most abstruse of all the topics we deal with in the Sunday School, would surely come better as the crown of all our teaching of Christian doctrine through the early "teenage" years, than coming four times over during the course.

Our thesis is, in short, that something on the lines of the Agreed Syllabus would, educationally, be sounder from the point of view of the individual child than what is in use at present. Taking the age group 11-16, a scheme something on the following lines could be drawn up:

Year	January-April	May-August	Sept.-Dec.
I 11-12	*Life of our Lord:* Luke	*O.T. outline:* Abraham-Moses	*The Early Church* Acts 1-15
II 12-13	*Life of our Lord:* Mark	*O.T. outline:* Joshua-Solomon	*The Early Church* Acts 16-28
III 13-14	*Life of our Lord:* Matthew	*O.T. outline:* The Divided Kingdom to the Exile, with the Earlier prophets.	*Paul and his Epistles*
IV 14-15	*Life of our Lord:* Parables and Miracles	*O.T. outline:* The Return to John the Baptist, Prophets of the Exile and Return.	*Hebrews and the general Epistles*
V 15-16	*Life of our Lord:* John	*Genesis and Exodus:* Man's beginnings and Fall, and God's provision for man's salvation.	*Things to Come:* Revelation

This outline is, of course, meant only as a tentative suggestion;

some teachers, for example, might like to see the three topics each year taught concurrently throughout the year instead of in three watertight compartments. It must be confessed also that such a Syllabus would, while overcoming some difficulies, raise others—in especial, practical difficulties.

First, there is the question of the rest of the programme of the Sunday School apart from the lessons, that is the general act of worship. Hymns are chosen and Scripture readings selected by the Superintendent to fit in with the general theme of the afternoon's lessons, and with a Syllabus of this kind at least five different lessons will be taking place. But this difficulty should not prove insuperable. During one third of the year, similar parts of the Gospel story will be being studied by all the school, even if from different Gospels. Surely with care suitable readings could be found to fit in with the theme of the lesson, leaving the teacher of the individual class to arrange the reading in class of the specific portion under review. With the Old Testament Sections also, the first week of May, say, would find lessons in progress on perhaps the call of Abraham, the commissioning of Joshua, the failure of Rehoboam, something about either Jeremiah or Daniel, and the Creation of the world and of man. Should it really be beyond the powers of an experienced Sunday School Superintendent to find a Psalm or a reading from an Epistle which would be a common denominator, a unifying factor; and hymns and choruses in the same way? It may call for more preparation by the Superintendent of *his* part of the afternoon's service, but what Superintendent will really object to this, or find it a burden?

A second difficulty, perhaps more considerable, is in the effect of a Syllabus of this kind on the teachers' preparation class. It will clearly be easier to conduct a preparation class if there are only two lessons, a senior and a junior, to be dealt with. But here again, the magnitude of the problem may be more apparent than real. Half of the available time could be devoted with great profit to principles and methods of teaching, discipline, and so on, especially insofar as they impinge on the week's lessons, and the rest of the time could be used by smaller groups of teachers under the leadership of the more experienced among them dealing with the preparation and presentation of the various portions of material actually prescribed at their grade.

Thirdly, the Lesson Magazines as at present produced by the C.S.S.M. would be inadequate for a system such as the one described. It is not easy to suggest how the "Agreed Syllabus" type

of course of lessons could be served by a monthly magazine; but of this we are convinced, that if our thesis is correct, and if this indeed in the direction in which Sunday School teaching in the future will develop, then when the time comes that regularly published material of this nature is required, the Mission and its Sunday School Department will rise to the occasion as nobly as they did when first they produced any Lesson Courses at all.

In closing, there is a most important point that should be made quite clear. It may appear from what has been said that we regard Sunday School work as the exclusive province of the professional educationist. Nothing could be farther from the truth, nor from our own mind. It must never be forgotten that far from being a sort of imitation of the public day school, the Sunday School was its true ancestor, for Robert Raikes at Gloucester from 1780 onwards taught the "3 R's" in order that children might learn to read the Scriptures. As an equipment for Sunday School teaching, a Diploma in Education or a Teacher's Certificate must always rank far, far lower than the "mighty ordination of the pierced Hands". The late Bishop of Peterborough, who himself had been Head Master in turn of Merchant Taylors' and of Winchester, said that though most Sunday School teachers were untrained, they "often made up for that by a natural genius for helping young children".[7] It would indeed be a sad day for Sunday Schools were they ever to lose the enrichment that they gain from the fact that their Superintendents and teachers are drawn from all trades and callings and walks of life. No amount of academic training will make a Michelangelo or a Rubens, but the greatest original geniuses with brush and palette have always delighted to sit humbly at the feet of those who can impart to them fresh technical skills. In the Sunday School the professional teacher can work side by side with his non-professional brethren, each learning from other and all conscious that they are fulfilling in their small and inadequate way the injunction of Him who said: "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me . . ."

Birkenhead.

[7] *Christian Education*, p. 146.